

School syndrome: Understanding the USA's magical belief that schooling can somehow improve society, promote access, and preserve advantage¹

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The US is suffering from a school syndrome, which arises from Americans' insistence on having things both ways through the magical medium of education. Society wants schools to express the highest ideals as a society and the greatest aspirations as individuals, but only as long as they remain ineffective in actually realizing them, since one does not really want to acknowledge the way these two aims are at odds with each other. Schools are asked to promote equality while preserving privilege, so perpetuating a system that is too busy balancing opposites to promote student learning. The focus is on making the system inclusive at one level and exclusive at the next, in order to make sure that it meets demands for both access and advantage. As a result the system continues to lure one to pursue the dream of fixing society by reforming schools, while continually frustrating one's ability to meet these goals. Also, a simple cure cannot be found for this syndrome because no remedy will be accepted that would mean giving up one of the aims for education in favour of another.

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Americans may not be well educated but we are well schooled. We do not score high on international comparisons of student achievement, but historically we have spent more time and money on our system of elementary, secondary, and higher schooling than any other nation on earth. One reason for this persistent pattern of educational largesse is that we are chronic social reformers, who are on a mission to solve a series of seemingly intractable social problems and who routinely turn to school as the most accessible if not most effective way to accomplish that mission. From this angle, we see schools as the primary way to accomplish our highest social ideals, or at least to represent these ideals in institutional form. Another reason for our heavy investment in schooling is that we are chronic social climbers, who are engaged in a relentless race with our peers to get ahead in the social order, or at least to avoid falling behind. From this angle, we see schools as the primary way to accomplish our greatest individual ambitions and to stave off our worst personal fears.

In combination, these impulses—one idealistic and collective, the other pragmatic and individual—have led to the school syndrome that I

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describe in my book, *Someone Has to Fail: The Zero-Sum Game of Public Schooling* (Labaree 2010). What makes school a syndrome instead of a strategy for Americans is the sheer compulsiveness of the way we keep turning to school for the answer to every social and individual problem. We never let our repeated failure to accomplish our ends through schooling get in the way of our continuing faith that schooling will come through for us this time around. **If we can just change the curriculum, revamp the structure of the system, increase access, and differentiate outcomes, then school reform will lead to better social problem-solving and greater individual opportunity.**

The school reform effort that created the US school system, the common school movement in the mid-19th century, was the most successful reform movement in the history of US education; indeed, it was the only such movement that had a substantial impact on both school and society. It established a system of publicly-funded universal elementary schooling; and it laid out an educational structure of local control, open access, loose coupling, and low academic standards that has persisted to the present day. Also, in the process of establishing this system, it successfully accomplished its primary social goal, which was to create a way to form the citizens and entrepreneurs who were needed for the market-oriented US republic of the mid-19th century. Once in motion, however, this school system came to have a mind of its own. As a thriving educational enterprise, it presented a tempting opportunity for reformers to put it to their own social uses, but it acquired an organizational momentum that made it hard to control and particularly difficult to turn around. Radically decentralized into a series of autonomous organizational units (systems, schools, and classrooms) and harnessed to a compelling common school rationale, the school system (to paraphrase Cuban 1988: 101) had ‘plans for reformers’.

Although reformers often were able to change the rhetoric of education and sometimes were able to tinker with its organizational form, they were remarkably ineffective in transforming how teachers taught and what students learned. This inability to get into the classroom became increasingly frustrating for reformers in the 20th century, leading to **two current US movements that have been deliberately engineered to create a more tightly coupled school system that will do what it is told. The curriculum standards movement (which seeks to harness learning to curriculum guidelines through high-stakes testing) and the school choice movement (which seeks to replace political control of schools with market control by empowering educational consumers) have developed approaches, each in its own way, to bring schools in line and shape classroom learning.** It turns out, however, that this concentrated effort to control academic learning may be unnecessary and even counterproductive to the achievement of reform goals. Something else we have seen about the US school system over time is that its **main social impact has come through its form rather than its content.** The system has never been so much about education as about schooling. Its primary accomplishments, such as they are, have come largely through its ability to bring together all the members of

a community in a single institutional space and subject them to a common social experience.

Another thing I found about the US school system is that reformers have had a more modest impact on it than consumers. Reformers tried hard to change the system in order to change society, but ever since the common school movement their impact has been quite limited. Educational consumers, on the other hand, have had a significant impact on both, and they were not even trying. Their aim was not to change school or society but simply to use education as a way to get ahead or stay ahead.

So let me tell a short story about the roots and ramifications of the US school syndrome. First, I review the major US school reform movements in the last 200 years and their weak effects. Then I recount why consumers have had a more substantial effect than reformers during the same period. I close with a summary of the unusable lessons for school reformers that we can draw from this study.

The modest impact of school reformers

The first US educational reform effort was the common school movement in the early and mid-19th century. This was a strikingly successful effort by republican reformers to resolve a crisis that nearly overwhelmed the US during its early years. The problem was that the republic was new and fragile, fighting to overcome a 2000-year history whose clear moral was that republics do not last. In the 1820s and 1830s, US society faced a rapidly-growing market economy, which brought great wealth and opportunity but also threatened two elements that were critical to keep the republic intact—a rough equality of condition among citizens and a strong culture of civic commitment. By creating a publicly-funded and controlled system of public schools that drew together everyone in the community, the common school movement played a critical role in the larger process of institution building during this period, helping to preserve the republic without putting a damper on economic growth. The invention of the public school system was part of a grand compromise between democratic politics and capitalist markets that has proven essential for the durability of the US as a liberal democracy. In the process of accomplishing this grand compromise, the common school movement established the basic organizational structure and political rationale for the public school system, both of which have endured to the present day.

At the core of this balancing of competing interests was the whig vision of the need to construct a new citizen for the republic, a new soul for the church, and a new conscience for society. As realized in the new social order, this vision would allow individuals to participate as self-interested entrepreneurs and workers in the market economy by ensuring that they internalized the political, religious, and moral controls that were needed in order to maintain the US as a Protestant republican nation. The common schools could not take all the credit for this stunning reconstruction of society, since there were many other institutional inno-

vations that moved this agenda forward, including the asylum, hospital, penitentiary, poorhouse, and juvenile reformatory. However, all of these new institutions shared a common form and function, and all of them were constructed around the educational model set by the common schools.

The reformers had some distinct advantages in creating a system that realized their vision, all deriving from newness. The US was a brand new country, which in revolution had shrugged off much of its British inheritance and thus was free to invent new traditions instead of following old ones. It had educational practices that preceded the development of the common school, but it had no pre-existing school system, whose precedents, habits, and organizational momentum might have acted as a drag on radical reform. In the 1820s, the country was undergoing a social transformation (burgeoning market economy, growing social inequality, and the collapse of the patriarchal social order), which was so threatening to its existence that modest incremental change seemed inadequate to the task and dramatic forms of social innovation seemed prudent and even conservative. In response to this challenge, school reformers found themselves part of a broad movement to invent new social institutions, each part of which reinforced the others. Operating at a time only 30 years after the founding of the US, the whig reformers could pursue social reinvention free of the kind of social undertow that would have restricted the scope of innovation in a more established society.

Common school reformers successfully built on these advantages to construct a school system whose core organizational characteristics faithfully expressed the whig agenda. Community-wide enrolment, public funding, and local control produced an inclusive and self-regulating community in the school, which in turn promoted the possibility of creating and reinforcing republican community. Age grading and teacher training promoted the kind of modelling, social pressure, peer competition, and professional instruction that would push students to learn and take to heart their new roles as citizens. The invention of the common school system exemplified the whig view that education in the broadest sense—inducting the populace into the new social order—was the responsibility of an expansive state.

The second major reform movement in the history of US education was the progressive movement, which spanned the first half of the 20th century. The progressive movement in education was something of a catchall, which encompassed a wide variety of individual elements. However, the movement had a few core orientations that justified the common label. In loose conjunction with the larger progressive political movement, all of the factions of educational progressivism were reacting to the social and political crisis of the early 20th century. This crisis was less fundamental and threatening to US society than the one that faced the whig reformers in the common school movement. The government was secure and the old liberal democratic bargain still held. However, the problem was to find a way for government and society to manage the new environment, which included a new corporate economy, growing inequality,

angry labour relations, rapid growth of cities, and a huge wave of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe.

Educational progressives came up with two related responses. What they had in common was a hostility toward the traditional academic curriculum, a focus on adapting education to the developmental needs and individual abilities of students, a concern for accommodating the influx of immigrants to the US, and a need to reconfigure secondary education in order to deal with the flood of new students entering the country's rapidly expanding high schools. One strand of this movement was the child-centred progressives, led by John Dewey and his followers.² These reformers sought to reconstruct schooling around the needs and interests of the child. The other was the administrative progressives, led by a large group of professional educators such as Ellwood Cubberley and David Snedden. These reformers sought to develop a machinery of schooling that would efficiently provide students with the skills required by economy and society. The administrative progressives were more effective than their child-centred colleagues in changing the structure of secondary education in the US, but, despite their best efforts over 50 years, even they were not able to overturn the core patterns of teaching and learning in US classrooms.

Progressive reformers shifted the emphasis sharply from the common school focus on republican community in the direction of social efficiency, as they tried to reorient the school system toward providing graduates with the right job skills and placing them into the positions where they were needed in the corporate industrial economy of the early 20th century. However, they were much less effective than their predecessors in harnessing the system to that goal. The narrow form of vocational education was a bust, since the preparation it provided was too narrow and backward-looking to be economically efficient and too complex to be implemented in schools. The contribution of education to economic growth in the 20th century was at best modest and sporadic (Labaree 2010: chapter 7). To the extent that education did help out economically, it was partly the result of providing general skills (reading, writing, and figuring) and general knowledge (about the physical and social world) rather than mastery of academic skills and school subjects. It was also partly the result of teaching students how to manoeuvre their way through the school system, by mastering the game of 'how to succeed in school without really learning' (Labaree 1997). The benefits came less from having students learn the curriculum than from having them learn how to pursue their own interests in an organizational setting, meeting external expectations while also doing what they wanted.

In one area progressives were more effective, but that was because they were building on the earlier success of the common school movement—by using the commonality of the school system to assimilate immigrants into US political, social, and economic life. In the 1950s and 1960s, the civil rights movement also picked up on this characteristic of the system and put it to good use initially in trying to reduce the social differences between blacks and whites by ending legal segregation of US schools. The movement succeeded at first and then ran into the wall of *de facto* residential segregation, which was much harder to crack through

the political and legal systems and which still left most blacks confined to schools where they were the overwhelming majority. The limitation that this movement confronted was in part a result of the strategy it adopted, defining the right to education as a private good rather than as a public good. The argument was that schooling provided a credential that was critically important for anyone seeking to get ahead in US society, so denial of equal access to this credential was a violation of consumer rights. The movement therefore took the political issue of democratic equality and changed it into the consumer issue of social mobility. Under the same logic of consumer rights, many white families saw the policy of busing students to other schools to promote integration as a threat to the value of their own children's right to an advantageous educational credential and so chose to oppose it. On both sides of this issue, however, the concern was about what students would attend which school and not about what subjects they would learn there.

Next came the curriculum standards movement, which began in the 1980s and then took on new life in 2002 with passage of the *No Child Left Behind Law*. It sought to use curriculum guidelines and high stakes testing to raise the level of academic achievement in schools and to reduce the differences in achievement between advantaged and disadvantaged students. Hard on its heels was the school choice movement, which began as a political force early in the 1990s. It aimed to break the public monopoly on education by empowering individual consumers, and by the early 2000s extended its scope by arguing that inner city residents should have the same school options that wealthy suburbanites had always enjoyed.

We do not know yet how the standards and choice movements will turn out, since both are still in play at the time I am writing (2012). However, we have seen that the ability of the progressive movement and the civil rights movement to achieve their reform goals has been modest at best. In both cases, whatever impact the school system has had on reform goals has come from the system's form and process not its academic content. Consistently, the central factors have been the accessibility of the system and the shared experience of doing school.

The immodest impact of school consumers

Educational reform has been only one part of the story of school change, and this part has been less consequential than the other part—the education market—which was more effective both in shaping the school system and in shaping the impact of school on society. The education market is the sum of the actions of all educational consumers as they pursue their individual interests through schooling. From early in the history of US education, US families and individuals have looked on education as an important way to get ahead and stay ahead in a market society. Even before formal schooling was commonplace, families sought to provide their children with the kinds of literacy and numeracy skills that were essential for anyone who wanted to function effectively in the commercial life of the colonies.

The introduction of universal public education in the common school era made such basic skills available to everyone in the white population at public expense. This meant that a common school education became established as the baseline level of formal skill for the US populace in the 19th century. For the small number of students who gained a more advanced education at an academy, high school, or college, this educational advantage gave them an edge in the competition for the equally small number of clerical, managerial, and professional roles. Late in the 19th century, the number of office jobs increased, which raised the value of a high school education, and, by the start of the 20th century, employers increasingly came to use educational qualifications to decide who was qualified for particular jobs, including both white collar and blue collar positions. At this point the economic returns on the consumer's investment in education became quite substantial all across the occupational spectrum.

For our purposes, in trying to understand the factors affecting school change in the US, the consumer effect on the school system is quite different in both form and function from the reformer effect. One distinction is that reformers treat education as a public good. They see their reform efforts as the solution of a social problem, and the benefits of this reform will be shared by everyone, whether or not they or their children are in school. In contrast, consumers approach education as a private good, which is the personal property of the individual who acquires it.

Another distinction is that reformers are intentionally trying to change the school system and improve society through their reform efforts. In contrast, consumers are simply pursuing their own interests through the medium of education. They are not trying to change schools or reform society; they are just trying to get ahead or at least not fall behind. However, in combination their individual decisions about pursuing education do exert a significant impact on the school system. These choices shift enrolments from some programmes to others and from one level of the system to another. They pressure political leaders to shift public resources into the educational system and to move resources within the system to the locations that are in greatest demand. At the same time these educational actions by consumers end up exerting a powerful impact not only on schools but also on society. When consumers used education to address their own social problems, the social consequences were no less substantial for being unintended.

A third distinction between the approaches that reformers and consumers take to schools is that reformers assert the importance of school learning, but consumers do not. As we have seen, the connection between reform and learning in practise has been rather weak. School reformers have not been terribly effective in bringing school and society in line with its goals, but what modest impact they have had tended to come more from the form of schooling than its content. In contrast, consumers take a less ideological and more pragmatic approach to schooling. What is most salient about schooling for them is not its use value (what usable knowledge it provides) but its exchange value (what doors it will open). Front and centre in the consumer agenda for gaining the greatest benefit from schooling is to acquire its marketable tokens of accomplishment. These

include gold stars, test scores, grades, track placements, academic credits, and—most of all—diplomas. From the consumer perspective, the form of schooling is everything. School provides the educational currency that students can cash in for a good job and a comfortable life.

The US school system was a deliberate creation of the common school movement; but, once the system was set in motion, consumers rather than reformers became its driving force. Consumers drove the extraordinary expansion of US school enrolments to a level higher than anywhere else in the world, starting with the surge from primary school into grammar school in the late 19th century, into high school in the first half of the 20th century, and into college in the second half. Reformers did not make school expansion happen; they just tried to put this consumer-generated school capacity to use in service of their own social goals, particularly the goal of social efficiency. Not only did consumers flood the system with students, but they also transformed the system's structure. They turned the common school, where everyone underwent the same educational experience, into the uncommon school, where everyone entered the same institution but then pursued different programmes. Their most consequential creation in this regard was the tracked comprehensive high school, which established the model for the reconstructed (not reformed) educational system that emerged at the start of the 20th century and is still very much with us.

At the heart of this reconstructed system is the peculiarly US balance between access and advantage. This balance was not the brainchild of school reformers proposing it as the educational solution to a social problem. Instead, it was the unintended outcome of the actions of individual consumers competing for valuable credentials in the education market. Like any other market, the education market consists of a diverse array of actors competing for advantage by acquiring and exchanging commodities; the difference is that the commodities here are educational credentials. As a result, the education market does not speak with a single voice, but with competing voices, and it exerts its impact not by pushing in a single direction, but by pushing in multiple directions. When the common school system was introduced into a society with an unequal distribution of social advantages, families naturally started to use it in their efforts to improve or preserve their social situation.

Consider how this dynamic worked. In cities like Philadelphia in the 1830s, reformers tried to lure middle class families into enrolling their children in the new common schools by offering a bribe. They created an extraordinarily uncommon school—a high school that was as distinguished as the best private academies and as good as most colleges—and made it accessible only to students who had first spent time in the common grammar schools. It worked, for the public system, which might have been limited only to those who could not afford private schooling, and was able to draw a cross-section of students from the community. As a result, however, the common school men inadvertently set off the competition for educational advantage. From the very start, the US school system simultaneously provided broad access to schooling at one level and exclusive access to schooling at a higher level. The race was on.

For most of the 19th century, the high school remained largely a middle-class preserve within the school system. During the same period, working class enrolments gradually expanded from the lower grades into the grammar school grades. By the 1870s and 1880s, grammar school enrolments were nearing universality in the US, which led naturally to growing consumer demand for access to the high school. Before the end of the century, the system yielded to this demand and began opening a series of new high schools, which led to a rapid expansion of high school enrolments, which doubled every decade from 1890 to 1940. Increased access for working class families, however, undercut the advantage that high school attendance had long brought middle class families. How was education supposed to meet both of these consumer demands within the same school system?

It turns out that the education market was much more adept at constructing such educational solutions to complex social problems than was the school reform process. With a little help from the progressives, consumer demand created the tracked comprehensive high school. It provided broad access to high school for the entire population while at the same time preserving educational advantage for middle class students in the upper academic tracks (curriculum streams), which started feeding graduates into college. This reconstructed school system really could have it both ways. However, how did the education market bring about this remarkable institutional response to a pressing set of social problems?

In a functioning liberal democracy, consumer demand quickly translates into political demand. Working class families did not have the social position or wealth of their middle class counterparts, but they did have the numbers. It was very difficult for a democratic government—then or now—to resist strong demand from a majority of voters for broad access to an attractive publicly-provided commodity such as schooling, at least not for long. At the same time, middle class citizens—then and now—retained substantial influence in spite of their smaller numbers, so government also had difficulty ignoring their demands to preserve a special place for them within the public school system. If democracy is the art of compromise, the comprehensive high school is the ultimate example of such a compromise frozen in institutional form.

One additional factor makes the education market so effective at shaping the school system. Markets are dynamic; they operate interactively. Individual educational consumers are playing in a game where everyone knows the rules and all actors are able to adjust their behaviour in reaction to the behaviour of other actors. By the start of the 20th century, a new rule was emerging in US society: the occupation level attained by individuals depends on their educational level. To get more pay, get more schooling.

The problem was that some people already had an educational edge, and they had the means to maintain that edge. Their children were in high school and yours were not. So you demanded and gained access to high school, only to find that the ground had shifted. First, it was no longer the same high school but a new one with its own internal hierarchy that placed your children at the bottom. Second, high school was no

longer the top of the educational line; college was. The middle class students in the upper tracks were now heading to college, leaving your children in the same relative position they occupied before—one step behind in the race for educational advantage. The only real difference was that now everyone had more education than before. In the 19th century, the credential of advantage was the high school diploma. In the early 20th century, it was the college degree. By the late 20th century, it was the graduate degree. The race continues.

Over the years, therefore, educational consumers have been more effective than school reformers in shaping the US school system. Consumers were the ones who developed the institutional core of the system: its delicate balance between access and advantage, and the corresponding organizational structure of the system, combining equality and hierarchy. Consumers have also been more effective than reformers in the impact they have exerted on US society through the medium of schooling. These social effects were not the intention that was guiding consumer behaviour in the education market; instead, consumers were trying to use education for their own personal ends, and the societal consequences of their actions were a side-effect. For individuals, the school system often has served their purposes: some have found that gaining more education enabled them to get ahead, and others have found that it helped them hold onto their competitive edge. However, collectively the social impact of market pressure on schools has cost consumers dearly.

The system of schooling that consumers created has not been able to increase social equality, nor has it been able to increase upward mobility (Labaree 2010: chapter 6). The population as a whole has seen its standard of living and quality-of-life rise as the economy has grown, but schooling has had no effect on the relative position of social groups in the social hierarchy. The rise in the education level of Americans in the last 150 years has been extraordinarily rapid, but this change has not succeeded in shuffling the social deck. People who had an educational edge in the competition were by and large able to maintain this edge by increasing their schooling at the same rate as those below them in the status order. The overall effect of this process over time was to increase the average education level of everyone in the labour queue, which artificially inflated educational requirements for jobs. As a result, people were spending more time and money on schooling just in order to keep from falling behind. They were forced to run in order to stay in place. The education market, therefore, had the cumulative effect of under-cutting the educational goal that most 20th-century school reformers aspired to attain: it sharply reduced America's social efficiency.

Schools have been ineffective in realizing the social goals of reformers, and their impact on educational consumers collectively has been counter-productive, but schools have been remarkably effective at reshaping US society in their own image. By *educationalizing* social problems, we have *educationalized* society itself.

One source of education's social impact is funding. Governments spend an extraordinary portion of their annual budgets on the educational systems, from pre-school through the most advanced graduate programmes

at universities. Families and individuals invest an enormous amount of money in direct costs for school supplies, tutoring, test preparation, uniforms, college counselling, and especially for college tuition, fees, and loans. Then there is the opportunity cost of what students could have been earning if they were not in school.

A second source of education's impact is time. Education devours somewhere between 12–25 years of a person's life just in attending classes in a modern developed society. In addition, the institution absorbs the efforts of the largest profession in modern societies—educators—plus a large number of collateral personnel who support the educational enterprise.

A third source of education's impact is process. Education forces families and governments and businesses to organize themselves around academic schedules, academic priorities, academic activities, academic procedures, and academic credentials. All three of these social effects of schooling continue to grow as the education market continues to pressure students to pursue ever higher levels of schooling.

This process of educationalizing society is in part an unintended consequence of the process of building the school system, kicked off by our need to find institutional expression of our ideals and our faith in the efficacy of individual solutions to social problems. However, this process does have its social uses, which help reinforce and preserve the expansion of schooling once it is in motion. Educationalizing society integrates social life around a set of common experiences, processes, and curricular languages. It gives stability and legitimacy to a social structure of inequality that otherwise might lead to open conflict. It gives stability and legitimacy to government by providing an institution that can be assigned hard social problems and that can be blamed when it fails to solve them. It provides orderly and credible processes by which people can live their lives, giving employers grounds for selecting a workforce, workers a way to pursue jobs, and families a way to pass on privilege and seeking social opportunity, even if the rationales for these processes (human capital, individual merit) are not very credible. Most of all, it gives us a way to express serious concern about social problems without actually doing anything effective to solve those problems. In this sense, then, the ability of schools to formalize substance—to turn anything important into a school subject or a school programme or a school credential—is at the heart of their success in educationalizing society.

Is the school syndrome curable?

I imagine that the story I have been telling may leave many readers feeling depressed about the promise and prospects for US schools. I have shown that the school system has been remarkably unsuccessful at carrying out the more recent social missions we have assigned to it. After its early successes, it has done very little to foster its core goals of democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility. It has not been able to promote equality of race, class, and gender; to enhance public health,

economic productivity, and good citizenship; or to reduce teenage sex, traffic deaths, obesity, and environmental destruction. In fact, in many ways it has had a negative effect on these problems by draining money and energy away from social reforms that might have had a more direct impact. Educationalizing social problems has consistently pushed education to expand its scope well beyond both what it should do and what it can do, and the result is a record of one failure after another. Yet at the same time the education enterprise is arguably the greatest institutional success in US history. It grew from a modest and marginal position in the 18th century to the very centre of US life in the 21st, where it consumes a stunning share of the time and treasure of both governments and citizens.

So how are we to understand the success of this institution in light of its failure to do what we asked of it? One way of thinking about this is that education may not be doing what we ask, but it is doing what we want. We want an institution that will pursue our social goals in a way that is in line with the individualism at the heart of the liberal ideal, aiming to solve social problems by seeking to change the hearts, minds, and capacities of individual students. Another way of putting this is that we want an institution where we can express our social goals without violating the principal of individual choice that lies at the centre of the social structure, even if this comes at the cost of failing to achieve these goals. So education can serve as a point of civic pride, a showplace for our ideals, and a medium for engaging in uplifting but ultimately inconsequential dispute about alternative visions of the good life. At the same time, it can also serve as a convenient whipping boy, which we can blame for its failure to achieve our highest aspirations for ourselves as a society.

In this sense, then, we can understand the whole grand educational enterprise as an exercise in formalism. We assign formal responsibility to education for solving our most pressing social problems in light of our highest social ideals, with the tacit understanding that by educationalizing these problem-solving efforts we are seeking a solution that is more formal than substantive. We are saying that we are willing to accept what education can produce—new programmes, new curricula, new institutions, new degrees, new educational opportunities—in place of solutions that might make real changes in the ways in which we distribute social power, wealth, and honour.

So is the US school syndrome curable? I think not. It is too deeply embedded in our values and traditions and too integral to our identity as a liberal democracy, which is always trying to establish an uneasy balance between equality and inequality and, thus, necessarily constructs a school system that fosters both access and advantage. To change the school system in any fundamental way—the essence of the reform ideal—can only really happen if we are willing to change US culture and society in an equally fundamental way. This would mean backing away from our commitment to liberal democracy, individualism, utilitarianism, and social optimism. Since these kinds of changes are unlikely, we are also unlikely to change the way we do school and the way we keep trying to reform society through school.

Sure, the system is messy, grossly inefficient, and deeply unfair. It keeps hope of advancement alive while continuing to preserve advantage.

However, there is something intriguingly elegant about the US school system. It is not doing what we ask of it, but it is remarkably effective at doing what it does. It deftly reconciles opposites and obligingly accommodates all of our higher and lower impulses. It offers a medium for expressing our public ideals and for acting out our private ambitions. It allows schools to change continuously and to remain very much the same. It organizes large parts of US life around its own routines and interests while presenting itself convincingly as a humble servant of the public will. It fails us regularly, but it retains our confidence, and we keep investing large sums of public and private money into it. I find it hard not to admire a system that is able to keep all of these balls in the air at the same time.

Unusable lessons for school reformers

At the end of most studies in education is a mandatory section where the author offers suggestions for how to fix the system. Never mind that the preceding sections have presented a complex and realistic analysis of why the system continues to be dysfunctional. The genre still mandates an upbeat conclusion that offers a neat set of bullet points for setting things straight: five ways to end the string of failures and do reform right the next time around. As an education skeptic—who admires the system for its elegance and resilience and who is pessimistic about the process of social engineering—I am reluctant to follow in this tradition, which would require me to deny the evidence of the previous seven chapters in a final burst of reckless enthusiasm.

However, the fact is that there are some lessons that can be drawn from the analysis in this paper, which—if followed, a big if—might head off some of the problems that school reformers have encountered in the past. I feel reasonably comfortable about offering these lessons primarily because, unlike many reform agendas, I do not think they are likely to do any harm. Why? Because I am quite confident that no one will follow them. The school system is too well entrenched, too closely connected to who we are as a people to be upset by a few feeble bullet points. Consider the list of suggestions that follows as an academic exercise in the most pejorative sense of the word. Do not worry; none of this will really happen. It is just a thought experiment.

Scale down your ambitions

The biggest problem with school reform efforts is their over-reaching ambition. David Snedden wanted schools serve as the mechanism for creating the socially efficient society. John Dewey wanted schools to be the embryo for democracy. George W. Bush wanted schools to promote personal liberty and social equality. These things are not going to happen. Best to think about educational goals at a more modest level. Over-reaching produces either abject failure or serious damage. For the former, think Dewey; for the latter, think Snedden.

Build on what schools can do

Schools are able to do some things well, so it pays to focus on these kinds of efforts. They can provide students with a broad set of basic skills (reading, writing, calculating, analysing, reasoning) and a broad understanding of major aspects of the natural and social world, the kinds of broad capacities we tend to consider part of a liberal education. Schools can be very effective at assimilating immigrants, transients, and other social newcomers into a local community and into the broader political, cultural, and social fabric of US society. They can have a modest effect in increasing the comfort level between people across social barriers of race, class, and gender by getting them accustomed to interacting with each other in the hothouse environment of the school. They can provide students with a variety of social skills and strategies for pursuing self-interest in an institutional setting by teaching them how to game the process of doing school without having to do much academic learning. Most of all, schools are good at credentialing. Their most important social function is to certify that students have completed a particular level of schooling by conferring degrees. This in turn helps assign graduates to particular positions in the queue of prospective workers, providing both employers and employees with a predictable and apparently legitimate method of deciding who gets which jobs. Schools do this not only by certifying the quantity of schooling that students have acquired but also by labelling the quality of this schooling, as identified by the rank, reputation, and relative exclusivity of the school or programme that students have attended.

Do not pursue goals that schools cannot accomplish

There are lots of things that schools cannot do well, so it is best to drop these from the school reform agenda. Schools may be able to make us more comfortable and less fearful of the Other, but they cannot equalize differences like race, class, and gender that are deeply embedded in the social structure. More schooling raises the education level of the population but it does not reduce social inequality. Likewise, schooling can offer some individuals the opportunity to get ahead of others, but simple logic dictates that it cannot do this for everyone, since when one person gets ahead then someone else has to fall behind. Not everyone can be above average. Education may be able to help promote economic growth—but only at certain historical points, at certain educational levels, and at very high cost to both governments and individuals. So we need to be quite wary of thinking that education is the cure for any, much less every, economic woe. Schooling can try to expose students to the issues surrounding major social problems and try to teach them behaviours that might help mitigate these problems, but in combination these efforts do very little to help with issues like improving public health, promoting peace, or preserving the environment. These things—like equality, opportunity, and economy—require not educational action but political action, since only

the political sphere is able, even if usually unwilling, to exert a significant impact on these issues. The question, then, is whether we want to continue to approach these issues obliquely and ineffectually through the medium of school reform or to take direct and substantive action through the mechanism of political reform.

Do not keep pushing for the upward expansion of the school system

Consumers are going to continue to push for access to ever higher levels of education, in an endless competition between those who want to get ahead through schooling and those who want to stay ahead through schooling. This creates tremendous political pressure on public officials to keep expanding the supply of higher education, but there is no good public policy reason for officials to accelerate this process. Endless expansion does nothing to increase mobility and equality and relatively little to spur the economy, but it is quite effective in sending both families and governments to the poorhouse. Continuous expansion raises the average education level of the population, which may be a good thing in many ways. It gives more people access to higher levels of US and world culture, to more forms of aesthetic appreciation, to more ways of expanding their intellectual horizons, and to more ways of pursuing personal fulfillment. As a result, I would never be one to say that we are over-educating citizens, but I would say that we are over-credentialing them. From this angle, all that this expansion does is keep inflating the credential requirements for jobs as the credential levels of people in the labour queue keep rising.

Assume that consumers not reformers are driving the system

One lesson from this study of school reform in America is that the major changes in the system have come from the actions of educational consumers not educational reformers. This suggests that reformers would be well advised to try to build their movements on top of the efforts of consumers, trying to ride the consumer wave instead of trying to roll back the consumer tide. Social efficiency was the most prominent goal of the two biggest reform movements in the 20th century, the administrative progressivism and the standards initiative, but it did not get very far in shaping either school or society. Instead we ended up with a remarkably inefficient system that produced many more graduates than we needed.

What we see in most recent movements, however, is a tendency for school reformers to pick up the social mobility argument, which had long been the credo of consumers, and put it to their own uses. This started with the desegregation movement, which made consumer rights the primary focus of its argument for change. Then we saw both the standards and choice movements at the end of the century belatedly adopting the same argument and incorporating it into their reform agenda, as they asserted that standards and choice would enable disadvantaged families

access to the same school learning and the same school choice that advantaged families had always had. Falling in line with the consumer may make these reform movements more effective, even though it does no good for school and society.

Focus on the form not the content of schooling

Another lesson from this study is that the broader social consequences of schooling, such as they have been, have come primarily from the form of the system rather than the content of academic learning that occurs within it. One key factor about the form of the system is access. Perhaps the central issue and primary impact of US schooling has come from its extraordinary accessibility to all parties at all levels of the system. Another factor is advantage. The system is great at sorting students and giving them labels that certify higher or lower levels of merit. A third factor is shared experience. This effect has been attenuated by the way schools at higher levels have sorted students by ability and social background, but nonetheless schools at the lower levels have played a major role in creating citizens, incorporating newcomers, and forming the core of a common US culture. A fourth factor is school process. If learning the curriculum has never been a major function of US schooling, which has long prided itself in low academic standards, then the process of schooling has played a much greater role. Americans have learned well how to do school, and in the course of this they have picked up some useful skills in interacting with peers, dealing with authority, and pursuing their own interests in an institutional setting.

The fifth and most important factor, however, is credentialing. This is the most consequential social product of the school system over the years, which has created its own form of cultural currency—grades, credits, and degrees—and given itself the monopoly on distributing this currency. In the process, schools have reorganized society in their own image, turning family life and economic life into adjuncts of the school system. If reformers are going to have any impact on school and society, they need to acknowledge that the form of the school system is the key medium for bringing about both desirable and undesirable social outcomes. Give up on tinkering with the curriculum and instead focus on tinkering with the form and process of the school system.

Do not assume you have the answer

Another lesson from this study is that reformers are usually cut-off from the information and expertise they need in order to come up with a policy that might actually bring about improvement in school and society. Reformers tend to occupy the centre of power not the centre of practise. This means they are far removed from the classrooms where both schooling and educating take place, so they are not in a position to see what is going on or to know how the system really works at the ground level. As a result, reformers tend to develop a highly abstract and theoretical form

of knowledge about schooling, which forms the basis for the educational policies they construct.

Absent from these models of understanding schools is the concrete and practical form of knowledge about schooling that is present in the practice of classroom teachers, who serve as the street level bureaucrats of the school system. Without taking into account this kind of local practical knowledge, reformers are likely to come up with policies that will not work, will not be adopted by teachers who find them potentially disruptive of effective practice, or, worst of all, will be implemented anyway and in the process trample all over the delicate ecology of classroom teaching and learning. Learning from this lesson would mean that reformers would need to follow the kind of strategy proposed by Tyack and Cuban (1995) in their book *Tinkering Toward Utopia*. Build into every reform effort a space for schools and teachers to adapt the reform to local conditions, which means that reformers would not try to implement the reform in its pure state but would allow it to hybridize within each local ecology.

Be a pessimist

A particularly dangerous thing about school reformers is not only that they are so sure about the accuracy of their analysis but also that they are so optimistic about the benefits of their reform for school and society. Reformers tend to assume the worst about the current state of the school system ('*anything* would be an improvement') and assume the best about the effect of their proposed changes ('this change would *have* to be a help'). Better to be a pessimist; assume that you might just be wrong and that the reform might actually make things worse. Hope for a sunny day, but carry an umbrella in case it rains.

For a reformer this means adopting the caution that comes with lack of certainty. Do good if you can, but at least try to do no harm. In practice this directs reformers to start small to see if the idea works out in a pilot setting, which would allow them to learn from the interaction with local practice and adapt the policy in ways that make it more workable and less harmful. With such concerns in mind, reformers would not try to tighten the coupling of the school system in order to make it more responsive to demands from above; instead they would work to preserve the loose coupling of the system, as a failsafe mechanism for preventing the possibility that a reform might bring about catastrophic systemic failure. Finally, as Scott (1998) suggests to social engineers in *Seeing Like a State*, school reformers should have Plan B waiting in the wings, so they can respond to bad news by having a way to back out of the reform effort, reversing the changes they made in order to avoid permanent damage.

The resilience of the school system

Of course, none of this is really going to happen. The US school system is highly resilient. Not only can it resist the best efforts of reformers to change schools, but it can also resist the efforts of people like me to

change the way reformers do their work. No reformer worth his salt would take the wimpy and self-negating approach to school change that I have suggested here. There is a name for reformers who choose to scale back their ambitions, focus only on what schools can do, think they might be wrong, and worry about doing harm. It is 'loser'. A school reformer is a political actor whose job is to gather support behind a particular policy, and you will not be able to convince supporters to march behind a banner that says 'Think Small' or 'Maybe We Can't'. You do not breed confidence if you speak in tentative tones, if you acknowledge that your critics may be right, and if you plan for failure.

So reformers often feel they need to speak with more confidence, certainty, and simplicity than they actually feel (in quiet moments of critical reflection). Or they may be compelled to sell themselves first on a reform idea that seems to offer high promise of solving a big problem—letting both the promise and the problem deflect them from looking at the idea too critically—and then start marketing it with vigour to the larger public. Or maybe they harbour no doubts at all. As the history of school reform shows, often simple ideas jump to the fore in a reform movement, based on ideological clarity of vision, leaving complex ideas in their dust. Think of Snedden trouncing Dewey. Whatever the case, following my advice would doom any reform effort before it even got started.

One thing that reformers need to take into consideration is how much they are committed to having an impact on school and society, regardless of whether this impact turns out to be positive or negative. If their hopes for doing good are higher than their fears of doing harm, then drawing on the lessons I have culled from the study of school reform would be bad tactics, since it would simply make things easier for another reformer who is more sure of being right. Employing these lessons in a reform effort would not only be bad tactics but also bad strategy.

To embrace the idea that the form of education is more important than its content is to deny the fundamental basis for the system's legitimacy. We are willing to invest vast amounts of time, money, and social energy in the school system because it educates our young, providing them with knowledge that is useful for both students and society. To deny the centrality of academic learning in the social function of schooling, as I do here, and to say that the system's most salient social product is not learning but credentialing, is to belie the system's core rationale as an institution of education. Without this rationale, the system looks like a sham, which offers tokens of accomplishment that we all choose to accept as representing mastery of a body of useful knowledge even though it is really only a measure of time spent in school. The credential market works for parents and students, for employers and employees, only as long as everyone agrees to maintain the fiction that the exchange value of diplomas represents the acquisition of knowledge with use value. It is a game that relies on all parties to maintain their confidence that diplomas signal substance, that schools promote education, that learning matters. If it does not, then our whole process of assigning jobs, pursuing opportunity, and awarding merit in the US is a fraud. Understandably, no reformer wants to go there.

One other aspect of these lessons makes it unlikely that anyone would implement them: To take a pessimistic stance toward school reform undercuts the central means for realizing the American Dream. We all know the adage: To get a good job, get a good education. Without schooling as a means, the chances of getting ahead in US society suddenly would seem quite remote. After all, the rise in our hopes for advancement for our children are tied to the rise in their education level. However, if the rise in education signifies not skill enhancement but credential inflation, and the result is to juggle positions in the labour queue rather than to move upward in the social order, then the story of social mobility fades to black. In particular, my suggestion to slow down the expansion of educational opportunity would seem at best uncharitable and at worst immoral—especially coming from a guy with a PhD. It looks suspiciously like I am trying to close the door of opportunity after passing through it myself, in an effort to preserve the scarcity and thus the value of the system's highest credentials. The resulting structure would look dangerously close to Snedden's (1900) vision of 'schools of the rank and file.'

Shutting down the expansion of higher education is simply unthinkable in the political culture of the US, and to propose doing so is political suicide. So it will not happen. However—as part of this impracticable thought experiment—consider where the current pattern of expansion is taking us. As master's programmes start filling up, which is already happening, there will be greater pressure to expand access to doctoral programmes, which are becoming the new zone of special educational advantage. So it seems likely that we are going to need to invent new forms of doctoral degree programmes to meet this demand, something that universities (always on the lookout for a new marketing opportunity) are quite willing to do. When that happens, of course, there will be demand for a degree beyond the doctorate, the current terminal degree in US higher education, in order to give some people a leg up on the flood of doctoral graduates pouring into the workplace. In some ways this has already happened for science PhDs, who have to complete an extensive postdoctoral programme if they want a faculty position in an US university. We may end up going the direction of many European universities, which require that candidates for professorships first complete a PhD programme and then prepare a second dissertation called a habilitation, which is in effect a super-doctorate. This puts people well into their 30s before they complete their educational preparation.

Political will is unlikely to halt our movement in this direction, but more practical considerations may have some effect. The reason is that the cost of education programmes rises exponentially at each higher level of the system, both for governments and consumers. Resistance in the US already became apparent in the last quarter of the 20th century. The rate of enrolment growth in higher education declined during this period, when fiscally constrained state governments resisted increasing appropriations for this sector, and as a result the costs of college increasingly shifted to consumers in the forms of higher tuition and higher student loans. The prospect of paying even more taxes or taking on ever more loans may put a damper on the rate of expansion of higher education

among citizen-consumers. However, the US belief in the value of schooling is so strong that we seem willing to continue shouldering a growing burden in one way or the other, even though the social benefits of our huge investments are small, in order to preserve the dream of getting ahead and to allay the fear of falling behind. Most likely, costs are only going to slow rather than stop the expansion of schooling.

At its heart, the school syndrome arises from Americans' insistence on having things both ways through the magical medium of education. We want schools to express our highest ideals as a society and our greatest aspirations as individuals, but only as long as they remain ineffective in actually realizing them, since we do not really want to acknowledge the way these two aims are at odds with each other. We ask schools to promote equality while preserving privilege, so we perpetuate a system that is too busy balancing opposites to promote student learning. We focus on making the system inclusive at one level and exclusive at the next, in order to make sure that it meets demands for both access and advantage. As a result the system continues to lure us to pursue the dream of fixing society by reforming schools, while continually frustrating our ability to meet these goals. It locks us in a spiral of educational expansion and credential inflation that has come to deplete our resources and exhaust our vitality. Also, we cannot find a simple cure for this syndrome because we will not accept any remedy that would mean giving up one of our aims for education in favour of another. We want it both ways.

Notes

1. Adapted, abridged, and reprinted by permission of the publisher from 'Living with the School Syndrome' in *Someone Has to Fail: The Zero-sum Game of Public Schooling* by David F. Labaree, pp. 222-256, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, Copyright (c) 2010 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.
2. A number of scholars (e.g. Prawat (1995) and Tanner (1991)) would not agree with my characterization of Dewey as a child-centred progressive. Dewey the philosopher was certainly more balanced than his most ardent followers in viewing classroom learning as requiring both a curriculum map and a child's journey, as demonstrated particularly in *The Child and the Curriculum* (Dewey 1902/1990). However, Dewey the polemicist put his money on the child every time, and he was appalled by the aims of the administrative progressives.

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